

## **Emails from Councillor Dickson**

The Friends are grateful to everyone who has emailed the ward councillors. The councillors have not been replying to the specific matters raised in the emails but Cllr Dickson has instead been sending out a standard email on behalf of himself and the other two ward councillors. Below under separate headings are corrections to some of the misinformation it contains.

### **Re-opening as soon as possible**

The claim that councillors want the building re-opened as soon as possible is not credible.

Lambeth inform us that building work will start on 1st September. By then the library will have been closed for 20 months. There is no justification for that closure. It has cost more to keep the library closed than if it had remained open throughout. Before closure UNISON held a series of one-day strikes. Lambeth persuaded them to call off those strikes by promising that no staff would lose their jobs. Thus the cost of staffing the library has continued even though it is closed. During closure all other expenses of the building and library have continued. However, the income from the 22 Creatives hiring desk spaces ceased on closure and Lambeth, in conformity with their standard policy for closed Listed Buildings, paid for 24 hour security.

Minet Library was closed at the same time as Carnegie Library. Lambeth have now re-opened it but with only about 1,000 books. Their excuse for not having more is that nearly all the space allocated to the library previously is needed to accommodate the Home Visit library service for the housebound, which operated from the basement of Carnegie Library before the closures.

The current situation is that Lambeth have two plans for Carnegie Library on the go and the two do not fit together. Lambeth say that there will be a gym run by Greenwich Leisure Limited in the basement and possibly on part of the ground floor, and that this will entail permanently building over much of the Reading and Wildlife Garden. But Lambeth also say that they want to transfer the building to Carnegie Community Trust, which wants the basement for a community cafe and to build a conservatory on the part of the garden which would be built on for the gym! The

ongoing uncertainty about what will happen is likely to generate more delays and must raise doubts about whether the building will re-open by the end of May 2018 as promised by Lambeth.

### **Government Cuts**

The Leader of the Council, Lib Peck, pointed out in an article in the Spring edition of *Fabian Review* that many people have a mistaken idea of what Councils spend most of their money on. They think that providing libraries and parks are major items of expenditure when this is not the case.

The cuts to five Lambeth libraries are supposed eventually to save £801,000 a year. The latest audited accounts show that Lambeth had a total surplus of income over expenditure for the two years to March 2016 of £302 million. The cost of libraries is so small that it does not even appear as a separate item.

The borough most directly comparable to Lambeth is Southwark. Not only has it kept all its 12 libraries open but, during the time that Lambeth has been threatening to close libraries, Southwark has opened three new traditional libraries, in Peckham, Canada Water and Camberwell. Instead of planning to subsidise a gym for which there is little demand, Southwark have made gym and swim free for all their residents all day Friday and after 2pm on Saturdays and Sundays.

Even the boroughs adjacent to Lambeth which have very low Council taxes, Wandsworth and Westminster, have kept their libraries open.

Closing libraries is a choice that the Herne Hill ward and other Lambeth councillors have made when they were completely free to keep all the libraries open as previously.

### **Town Planning**

Cllr Dickson is wrong to say that the basement excavation has been designed for a gym. It was proposed years before the gym plan and the excavation will not be deep enough for a gym, that is for uses in which people jump or raise their hands above their heads.

Contrary to what Cllr Dickson claims the use of the building for Town Planning purposes has been as a library throughout the

period since the current Town Planning regime was introduced in 1947. The condition to which he refers in the Planning permission gives a Council officer the right to decide what uses in the building are or are not part of the library use. Inserting it in the permission had the consequence that the Planning committee did not have to reach a public decision on whether there will be vigorous exercise classes on the ground floor, as Lambeth and GLL previously proposed.

The classes are important. If they do go ahead then the ground floor will need to be strengthened and damping inserted to prevent the whole of the ground floor bouncing when there is a group of people jumping up and down to a heavy bass beat. The Friends have raised this with Lambeth repeatedly and the Council's Consulting Engineers have also pointed out that this work will be needed for gym use of the ground floor. However, Lambeth have never responded and therefore appear to be intent on allowing the exercise classes without the necessary work.

### **Financial Sustainability**

Lambeth are proposing a rent-free 5 year lease to GLL and not to require GLL to contribute to maintenance or other costs of the building. They say that by the end of the 5 years the gym will be making a profit and that GLL will then renew the lease and start paying rent. However, all the indications are that the gym is not needed and very few people want it. Why this should change between now and 2023 has never been explained.

Lambeth have repeatedly said that they are putting money into Brixton Rec to keep it going but only for a few years. So it may be that they are planning to sell the site of the Rec for redevelopment. But even if the Rec were disposed of, we cannot expect significant numbers of the displaced users to come to Carnegie Library. There are more conveniently located gyms and several leisure centres offering a much wider choice of facilities.

There is clearly no justification for the councillors' assertion that investing money in the gym now will produce a guaranteed income stream in the future. On the contrary, in the event of the gym continuing after 2023 it would almost certainly need to continue being subsidised by Lambeth.

Lambeth obtained detailed condition reports on the building from professional architects and surveyors. The gist of this professional advice is that at some time during the next 20 years the slate roof coverings should be renewed and, while the necessary scaffolding is in place, the building should be cleaned and cosmetic repairs carried out. Lottery funding for 100% of the cost was available under a scheme for local authority public libraries but Lambeth did not apply. The sensible course must be to keep the building as a public library in the expectation that another round of Lottery money will be available in due course to pay for this work.

Although the sums Lambeth propose to "invest" are small in the context of Lambeth's overall finances, they are very large sums to spend on a single Lambeth library. It should perhaps be emphasised that this is all Lambeth's money, though some of it would be diverted from improving leisure centres GLL manages for the Council.

The preliminary estimate for the excavation was £650,000. The preliminary estimate for creating the gym is a further £1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> million and the half of CCT's project to be borne by Lambeth is initially put at £2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> million. Adding these together comes to nearly £5 million. We can be sure that the estimates will increase. Indeed, the one for the excavation has already doubled to £1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> million even before the work has started.

Spending over £5 million on these highly speculative projects cannot be sensible. If instead £5 million were invested long-term a modest return of 3% per annum would be sufficient to cover the cost of running the building and our library as it was before closure. If the return was what Lambeth say they expect on their charitable funds, 7% per annum, then it would also cover the cost of running Minet Library as it was before closure. And, of course, there would be the bonus of not having to subsidise the running costs of the gym.

### **Upper Norwood and Waterloo Libraries**

One room in Upper Norwood Library has been completely cleared of books and the main room has been fitted out with furniture on castors to provide flexibility of use. In other words, physically it is broadly similar to how Carnegie Library was before Lambeth

closed it with the exception that there is no room for desk space hire or other means of generating substantial income.

Upper Norwood Library has been transferred to a trust and is now officially "Upper Norwood Library Hub" but the trustees do not have any way of raising the money to run it. No grant-making body will provide running costs for what remains in substance a public library. They say that it is for local government to fund the running of public libraries. The library is being kept alive by funding from Lambeth, which Lambeth insists is only temporary. We may comfort ourselves with the expectation that the funding will continue until the future of Carnegie Library is settled.

Waterloo Library was closed and converted into small business units, presumably providing income for Lambeth. A library service is being provided in a room which is temporarily available behind a cafe in an Evangelical Christian Centre. Lambeth claim that the library is visited by large numbers of people. It is not. Lambeth are relying on a floor pad to count how many people go in and out of the library. However, the pad's location means that it counts the users of most of the cafe seating and the cafe staff when they deliver the customers' drinks or other orders. Also, it counts people leaving the adjacent school by a door at the back of the room. The "library" has few visitors and even fewer who borrow books.

## **Books**

Lambeth have made a commitment that the borough as a whole will have the same number of books despite their proposed cuts to five libraries. This would not make sense if the purpose were to serve library users because it means a large number of books have to be placed in inaccessible storage. Lambeth were planning to use their nuclear bunker to store the surplus books but then discovered it is too damp for this purpose. They are now renting warehouse space in Mitcham instead.

The reason for the commitment is that it provides opportunities for political spin. Councillors can tell the users of a library which has been cut that it will in future have the same number of books as previously. Strictly speaking this is the truth because any Lambeth library book can be ordered online for collection from any Lambeth library. But it is also grossly misleading because

the users can be expected to interpret it as a promise that that particular library will contain the same number of books as before.

We are told by both Lambeth and Carnegie Community Trust that the Trust would "host" a "library."

The only information we have from Lambeth about how many books there would be is a statement from the Cabinet Member responsible for libraries that the number would be "limited."

Although Upper Norwood still has sufficient stock to offer a reasonable choice to users of all ages, the number of books has been reduced beyond what was necessary to clear one room. There are wall bookcases in another room which are completely empty, suggesting that Lambeth is deliberately restricting the number of books unnecessarily.

The number of books is important. If a library has too few then, however well-chosen the books are, there will not be enough choice to keep borrowers coming back repeatedly. Falling use is the perfect excuse for closing a library. Waterloo Library has about 7,500 books and this is clearly inadequate. The present writer spent six hours there recently and it appeared that lending was at a rate of less than one book an hour.

The Project Group, which was the Trust's original predecessor, insisted that the Trust would only provide space for books if the space were rented from the Trust under a commercial lease at a market rent. As the Trust refuses to publish its business plan, the only reasonable course is to assume that this is still the intention. Bearing in mind that Lambeth are representing the library cuts as a cost saving exercise, we cannot expect them to pay a substantial rent. Thus it seems that "limited" would be very limited indeed, perhaps about 1,000 books as at Minet, Tulse Hill and Streatham Vale.

Carnegie Library had nearly 20,000 books before it closed and the number being borrowed was rapidly increasing. A much smaller stock would put the re-opened library in a downwards spiral of continually reducing use, ending in permanent closure.

## **"Some will continue to oppose our plans"**

As well as immediate neighbours being almost unanimous in their opposition to the plans, there is also a great deal of strong opposition in the wider area.

All political parties active locally are opposed, that is the Conservatives, Greens, Liberal Democrats and the Constituency Labour Party, which has resolved that all 10 Lambeth libraries should be kept open as previously. It has also called on Lambeth to take urgent steps to restore public confidence following the damage done to the Party locally by Lambeth's handling of libraries and its proposed sales of Lambeth's more attractive housing estates for redevelopment.